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Among the leaders attending the rollout of the "2010 Regional Agenda" are, from right foreground, Buffalo Mayor Byron W. Brown, University at Buffalo President John B. Simpson and Erie County Executive Chris Collins.

Bill Wippert/ Buffalo News

UB 2020 remains crown jewel of the region's economic agenda

Local leaders present strategy for next year

by Matt Glynn
NEWS BUSINESS REPORTER
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Business and political leaders in the Buffalo Niagara region are sticking with the University at Buffalo's ambitious UB 2020 plan as their top economic-development priority.

UB 2020 ranked at the top of the "2010 Regional Agenda," backed by local political and business leaders. It was the third straight year that the UB plan topped the regional list.

While Andrew J. Rudnick, president and chief executive officer of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, warned against "economic-development silver bullets," he said UB 2020 represents a breakthrough opportunity for Buffalo Niagara.

UB 2020 aims to increase the university's enrollment by 10,000 students, add 2,300 faculty and staff members, and build out its campuses.

"With extended help from members of our state delegation, Albany must enact the policy changes that UB needs," Rudnick said Monday at a rollout of the agenda at Pettibones Grille.

Political and business leaders from the region collaborate on the annual agenda to tell state and federal lawmakers what they view as the highest economic-development priorities. The list is a combination of projects and policy initiatives that the leaders deem most vital.

The list of priorities comes as the state wrestles with a huge budget deficit and the federal government copes with the impact of a lengthy recession.

"These are very difficult fiscal times that we're dealing with," said Buffalo Mayor Byron W. Brown. "And so certainly we're concerned about the ability to realize some of these items that are on the agenda. I think the positive thing is that the community is speaking with one voice, that we are unified in presenting this agenda, and I think that gives us a better opportunity of achieving success."

Erie County Executive Chris Collins echoed Brown's point, saying the leaders' unity on the priorities was a strength. "For too long, we spoke with multiple voices, and in doing so, Albany and Washington were able to ignore us," he said.

William L. Ross, chairman of the Niagara County Legislature, said the benefits that would result from the items on the agenda would cross county lines. "It is a coordinated effort to get this economic development going," he said.

The leaders urge greater state and federal attention to four "target industry" sectors □ life sciences, tourism, advanced manufacturing and agribusiness □ they say could foster more private investment.

The list includes \$100 million for a downtown Buffalo Academic Health Center to support the life sciences industry, along with \$2 million for work force development related to the sector.

The agenda also calls for \$40 million to build a new Niagara Experience visitors center in Niagara Falls, \$40 million for a stadium to be used by Buffalo State College, the Buffalo Public Schools and amateur sports teams, and \$5 million for a parking ramp to serve the Buffalo State campus and cultural attractions.

It also calls for \$10 million in state funds for the final phase of restoration of the Darwin Martin House. In addition, the agenda advocates federal reauthorization of the Small Business Innovation Research Program and funding to increase broadband access in the region's rural areas.

Other elements of the agenda call for supporting the region's transportation networks, including the Peace Bridge expansion, a new Niagara Falls International Railway Station and high-speed rail.

The leaders say land-development investments are vital since they create the "shovel- ready" properties that companies look for when they want to act quickly on building a new location.

The agenda also advocates a state energy policy focused on economic development and the creation of an effective statewide economic-development program to replace the existing Empire Zone program, which is set to expire next year.

Also on the agenda is health care reform that addresses the skyrocketing costs, without placing "additional burden" on employers.

The agenda also recognizes Buffalo Niagara's position in the Great Lakes region and urges the federal government to attend to the lakes' environmental needs, as well as promote trade across the U.S.-Canada border.

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